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ABSTRACT

Parents can make better decisions regarding a care setting for their toddler when they have information about how toddlers learn and about quality programs for toddlers. This brochure provides information to parents on how toddlers learn through play, exploration, and observation; the importance of toddlers learning at their own pace; and the role of a secure environment. The brochure also delineates the special challenges and opportunities in group care for toddlers, including developmental characteristics of toddlers, the caregivers' role, and the importance of the caregiver-family partnership. Also presented are examples of appropriate toddler activities in a family child care home and in a child care center. In addition, the brochure contrasts effective and poor program practices, including the children's relationship with the caregiver, caregiver behavior, literacy activities, inclusiveness of the setting, using routine tasks as learning opportunities, health and safety procedures, and the staffing schedule. The brochure also lists safety precautions for parents to look for when they visit a program for toddlers, and provides information on additional resources available through the National Association for the Education of Young Children. (KB)

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A Caring Place for Your Toddler

Marilyn Smith

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Toddlers are *stepping out*—out of baby booties and into walking shoes, out of infancy and into childhood. They are learning to explore the sights, sounds, and textures of a whole new world.

We now know that children begin learning from the moment they are born, and the environment we create lays the foundation for their development throughout life. When a child first steps out of the home and into a child care setting, parents may feel excitement and sadness at the same time. By finding a caring place for your toddler, you help her grow to feel good about herself and to thrive.

At this stage, all areas of development—thinking, feeling, moving, and getting along with others—are intertwined. Newly mobile toddlers want to take off in every direction at once and experience every sensation the world has to offer. But toddlers also need to feel safe and secure so they can develop a love of learning that will be an asset during school years and beyond. Relationships with caring adults give toddlers the confidence to experiment as they grow, *step by step*, into people who are ready to meet the challenges of life.



HOW TODDLERS LEARN

The goal of a good program for toddlers is to help them develop into individuals who can sustain themselves, feel good about themselves, and grow up to be productive members of society. Toddler "curriculum" starts from the very beginning, with good caregivers and a "developmentally appropriate" program—one that provides safe, challenging, and meaningful materials for children's learning.



Toddlers learn best . . .

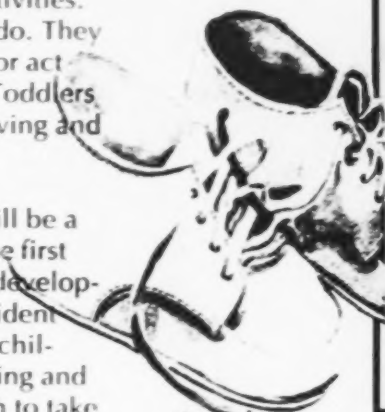
- **when they feel secure.** Children thrive in a warm, safe, loving environment that gives them the confidence to explore. That's why it's so important for caregivers to be responsive and nurturing. The more secure children feel, the more they are willing to take risks, try new things, and make connections with others.



- **through play, exploration, and observation.** Like all children, toddlers learn best when they engage in challenging and meaningful activities. Often they pretend to do what adults do. They may play dress-up with mommy's hat or act out driving a car or building a house. Toddlers learn "how the world works" by observing and interacting with objects around them.



- **at their own pace.** Good caregivers know there will be a wide range of abilities in children in the first three years of life. Children will reach developmental milestones when they are confident and ready. For example, before young children can deal with tasks such as weaning and toileting, they must feel secure enough to take on new responsibilities.



What makes a good program for toddlers?

Today's busy families need support and services in addition to what they can offer their children. More and more young children attend child care every day. Good caregivers provide children with the stimulation they need, and they show them that the world is a safe, friendly place. Nothing compares to the relationship between a child and a parent, but strong bonds with a few caregivers help a child become more confident and emotionally secure.



Group care for toddlers presents special challenges and opportunities. During this period, children's needs may change rapidly. That's why it's important for caregivers to be warm and nurturing, knowledgeable about child development, and understanding of the fact that each child will learn and grow at her own pace.

The child

Toddlers are beginning to wonder who's in charge. After all, they are growing more inquisitive about the world around them. Their strong sense of self is evident when they begin to say No to adults. They move constantly and are always on the lookout for new and interesting sights. What may appear as a discipline problem is often evidence of a toddler's struggle to understand how she fits into the world.

Children at this stage are more aware of themselves and how others see them. They can usually distinguish boys and girls. They begin to recognize appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Some of life's biggest challenges face children at this time: how to be safe, how to get what they need without taking from others, and how to express themselves. These are accomplished through self-control. Toddlers may falter at times, slipping back into babyhood; they alternate between fits of frustration and pride in their discoveries.

Lots of exciting developments occur between 12 months and 3 years. Children can turn the pages of a book; sometimes "reading" to you; scribble with crayons or markers; thread large beads through holes; and handle puzzle pieces. Many toddlers walk up stairs one foot at a time; kick and throw a ball; begin to eat with a spoon and fork; and love to divide things into categories by shape, size, color, or type. A child's environment should offer her the chance to take part in these activities, to pretend, and to play by herself or in a small group. She should have the opportunity to make choices and to practice sharing and getting along with others.

The caregiver

Caregivers are partners in children's learning, there to stimulate and introduce new objects and ideas. Not only do caregivers need to have a strong knowledge of child development, but they also need to take the time to get to know a child's individual characteristics and preferences. Is a toddler having a hard time learning to feed herself? Is she particularly cranky before she goes to sleep? Tuning into these patterns and stages helps caregivers give children the individual support they need.

Caregivers should set clear and consistent limits for toddlers. These children may want to be independent, but they still don't always know how to be safe. Toddlers are constantly testing the waters and pushing things to see how far they can go. They need a few simple rules—and sometimes a few gentle reminders!

Toddlers strive to be self-reliant, and they count on the understanding and attentiveness of the adults in their lives. Children at this age are warring between babyhood and childhood. One minute a toddler may want to act like a grown-up and help an adult put away his blocks. The next minute, he may not want to help at all—and claim all the blocks for himself. Toddlers are beginning to understand what's expected of them, although they might not always comply. It takes a patient caregiver to sense the shifts in children's moods and needs. It also takes a perceptive one to make the best out of this exciting time for learning.

At Laura Jackson's Family Child Care Home

Knowing how toddlers love to "fill and dump," Laura brings in a large assortment of empty cereal boxes and smaller food boxes, collected with the help of the children's parents, and places them on the floor along with a supply of small Lego blocks. The children find lots of things to do with them. Chloe carefully puts blocks into a large cornflake box and then empties them out. Jorge and Janine build a tower and laugh with delight when it falls. Eighteen-month-old Sam first put the boxes into two piles: big and little, and now he is laying the small boxes end to end in a long winding chain—a wall, a road, or perhaps simply a chain? Laura isn't sure until she sees him carefully steering a small car along the road. "Your car has a long way to go!" she exclaims. "Go slow. Not fall," Sam says.

The caregiver-family partnership

Think of a good program for toddlers as a partnership between parents and caregivers. Look for a caregiver with outlooks on discipline, weaning, and toileting that are compatible with your own. Continuity between home and the child care setting helps toddlers learn good behavior. It also helps them gain independence. Toddlers are growing rapidly, so parents and caregivers should communicate daily about how to meet the changing needs of the child.

Young children's identities are rooted in their families. Naturally, children feel more confident when they see that their parents trust and are comfortable with their caregivers. It's not a competition for children's affection—strong bonds with one or two caregivers can never replace the love of a parent. But it's important for your child to be attached to the person who takes care of her when you're not around so she will feel secure enough to learn and thrive.

In a good caregiver-family partnership, each offers support and insight to the other. The goal is to reach mutual understanding, even when views about child rearing differ. Good caregivers know that families are a constant and powerful influence in a child's life. Strong listening skills and respect for different perspectives allow caregivers to work with parents to create the best environment for an individual child.

At the Great Beginnings Child Care Center

Two-year-old Suki watches an older toddler drink from a regular cup and pour liquid from a pitcher. Michelle, her caregiver, knows that Suki yearns to do the same, so she lets her experiment and get a little messy. Michelle knows that Suki is developing her eye-hand coordination and becoming more independent.

At home, Suki cries, "Me! Me!" when her mother pours her milk for her. She refuses her training cup. Suki's parents want her to learn new skills, but they voice their concern. "We can't have Suki making a mess like that or wasting food at home," Suki's father tells Michelle.

Together, Suki's parents and her caregiver brainstorm about ways for Suki to develop self-help skills without making a mess or wasting food. "Maybe," Michelle suggests, "you could allow Suki to pour water over a towel or pan until she becomes more adept."

Suki's mother says, "Yes, that's a good idea. And maybe I'll offer her more finger foods—the kind she can handle herself. That will help her feel more independent."

Checking Out Safety

Here are 10 safety precautions for parents to look for when they visit a program for toddlers:

1. Covered electrical outlets and wires kept out of children's reach.
2. A first-aid kit handy and well stocked.
3. Nonslip carpet; furniture sturdy and low so children can pull themselves up.
4. Children always kept in sight; objects that might trip them removed.
5. Sanitized nontoxic toys without breakable parts or any parts that can be easily swallowed.
6. Fire extinguishers located on every floor and near the kitchen stove.
7. Smoke detectors located outside all sleeping areas and at the top of any stairway.
8. Posted evacuation plans and up-to-date safety plans readily accessible.
9. Enclosed outdoor play areas separate from those of older children; equipment safe for toddlers (see NAEYC brochure *Playgrounds: Safe and Sound*, order #552).
10. Adult equipment areas (garages, tool sheds, balconies, and the like) securely off-limits to children.



FURTHER READINGS: RESOURCES FROM NAEYC

Brilliant, S., & C. Copple, eds. 1997. *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs*, revised edition. (NAEYC order #234)

Brochures

Ditman, L.L. *Finding the best care for your infant or toddler*. (NAEYC order #518)

How to choose a good early childhood program. (NAEYC order #525; in Spanish order #510)

McCraeken, J.B. *Off to a sound start: Your baby's first year*. (NAEYC order #574)

McCraeken, J.B. *Playgrounds: Safe and sound*. (NAEYC order #552)

No many goodbyes: *Ways to ease the transition between home and groups for young children*. (NAEYC order #573)

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NAEYC order #509. Single copies of this brochure are 50¢ each; 100 copies are \$10. Other brochures currently available in this series: *A Good Preschool for Your Child* (NAEYC order #517); *A Good Kindergarten for Your Child* (NAEYC order #524); and *A Good Primary School for Your Child* (NAEYC order #579).

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IN YOUR TODDLER'S PROGRAM...

What you want to see

Children remain with a primary caregiver over time so they can form a strong relationship with her. The caregiver learns to respond to the toddler's individual temperament, needs, and cues, and builds strong communication with the child's family.

Caregivers praise children for their accomplishments and help them to feel more confident and in control of themselves.

Caregivers, recognizing that toddlers are not yet able to communicate their needs through language, promptly respond to children's cries or other signs of distress.

Caregivers communicate warmth through pats on the back and hugs or holding toddlers in their laps.

Caregivers set good examples for children by treating others with kindness and respect. As children gain in language ability, adults encourage them to resolve differences with words.

Recognizing that frequent testing of limits and saying No! is part of a toddler's healthy development, caregivers minimize their restrictions unless children are in physical or emotional danger. Rather than merely refusing and restraining children, caregivers offer a few options and emphasize what the child is allowed to do.

The setting is "inclusive," that is, physical space and activities allow all children to participate. For example, a child with a physical disability eats at the table with other children.

Caregivers frequently read to toddlers, individually on the adult's lap or in groups of two or three. Caregivers sing to toddlers, do finger-plays, and act out simple stories as children actively participate.

Sturdy picture books in the child care setting depict people of different ages, racial and cultural groups, family types, and abilities/disabilities.

Everyday tasks such as eating, toileting, and dressing are opportunities for toddlers to learn new skills and better control their own behavior. Caregivers support toddlers' attempts to take care of themselves and provide items that are easy for toddlers to use.

Children have many opportunities for active, large-muscle play both indoors and outdoors. Play equipment is safe and challenging for toddlers. Their outdoor play space is separate from that of older children.

Adults follow health and safety procedures, including proper handwashing methods and universal precautions. Each area has clearly written procedures for waste disposal.

Caregivers directly supervise toddlers by sight and sound, even when they are sleeping.

Caregivers see parents as the primary source of affection and care for children. Parents are always welcome in the home or center.

Caregivers have training in child development or early education specific to the toddler age group. They are warm and responsive to children's needs and patient in supporting children as they become more independent.

A maximum group size of 12, with 1 adult for no more than 6 toddlers (preferably fewer) allows for an intimate atmosphere and the high level of supervision that toddlers require.

The staffing schedule allows each toddler to develop a close relationship with a primary caregiver. Toddlers stay in the same group for many months (and from year to year, if possible) to ensure close relationships.

What you don't want to see

One-to-one relationships between children and caregivers are not top priority. Toddlers are shifted from group to group or cared for by whichever caregiver is available at a given time.

Toddlers are criticized for their clumsy attempts to master skills. -OR- Caregivers are overly protective, making toddlers feel that they cannot do things for themselves.

Crying is ignored; caregivers do not respond consistently, or they respond to children only at their own convenience.

The home or center has "no-touch policies" that ignore the importance of touch to children's healthy development.

Adults are harsh to children when under stress. Their attempts to punish or control aggressive toddlers only cause more hostility.

Caregivers constantly say No! to children even when there is no threat to their well-being. Children are punished for asserting themselves. -OR- Caregivers ignore children and allow aggressive behavior to escalate.

Caregivers do not include children with special needs in everyday activities such as eating or playing with other children.

Caregivers expect children to sit in large groups and watch activities having little opportunity to participate.

Toddlers do not have access to books because they may tear or mess them up. Images in books are highly stereotyped.

Children feel dependent and incompetent because caregivers do everyday tasks for them. Eating utensils, for instance, are not designed for children's easy use.

Indoor space is cramped and unsafe for toddlers who are just learning how to move their bodies and need to run more than walk. Caregivers spend time trying to control toddlers' movements.

Health and safety procedures have not been clearly thought out and are not written or displayed. Consequently, adults forget handwashing or other essential precautions.

Caregivers leave children unattended when they are playing.

Caregivers make parents feel in the way or isolated from their own experience. They may demonstrate competitive or patronizing attitudes toward parents.

Caregivers have little training with toddlers. They view working with this age group as a chore or merely as "babysitting."

Both group size and the child-staff ratio are too large to allow for adequate supervision and individual attention to each child. The staffing schedule results in toddlers relating to several adults over the course of the day.

Caregivers shift often from child to child or group to group. -OR- Poor working conditions and/or compensation cause a high rate of turnover among staff.

